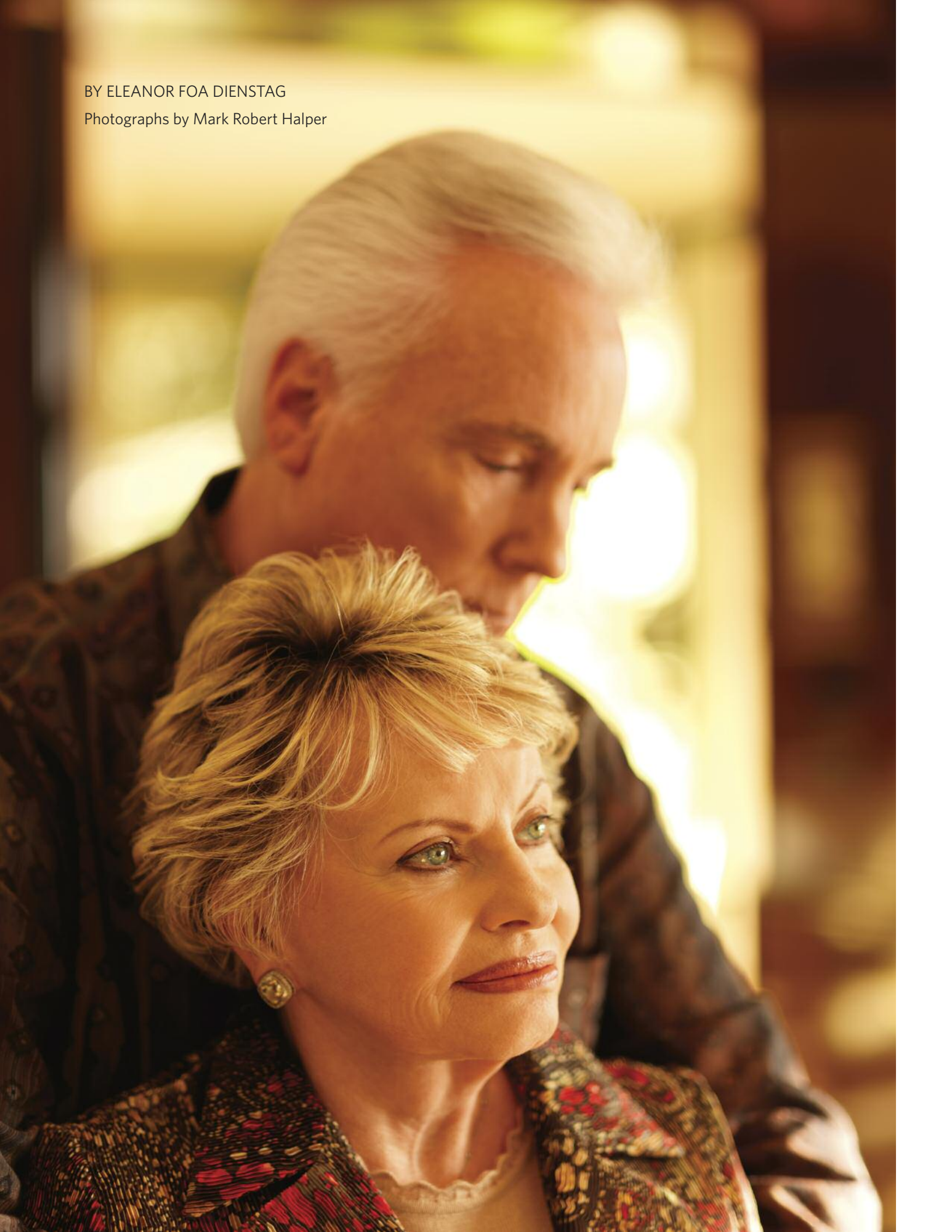


BY ELEANOR FOA DIENSTAG

Photographs by Mark Robert Halper



One From the Heart

“Believe in what you’re supporting, be passionate and follow your heart.” Vera Guerin has lived by these words, beginning with her marriage to Paul Guerin—40 years ago this July—despite the vigorous objections of her family.

Theirs was a storybook romance. Vera met Paul at her brother’s Bar Mitzvah. Paul was her best friend’s date. “Something clicked instantly for both of us,” says Paul. “She was beautiful, alive, animated, and gracious. I told my mother that night I’d met the girl I was going to marry.” Paul was not Jewish, however, and Vera’s parents would not accept the relationship. Paul eventually converted, but the family was still not comfortable. “In Vera’s family, no one had ever married outside of their religion,” says Paul. “So we eloped to Las Vegas. I was 22 and Vera was 21.”

Today, Vera’s other great passion is the Women’s Guild Lung Institute at Cedars-Sinai. Its mission is to advance treatment and research for the more than 35 million people in the U.S. who suffer from pulmonary diseases, ranging from lung cancer and cystic fibrosis to emphysema and asthma.

“I’m very excited about this project,” says Vera, who has asthma. “With more and more women dying of lung cancer—many of them, like close friends of ours, non-smokers—I thought it was a very timely undertaking, especially since there is nothing like it on the West Coast.”

The Women’s Guild Lung Institute has three components: medicine, surgery (including minimally invasive video-assisted thoracic surgery), and research. Last year The Guerins made a \$5 million commitment to underwrite the research arm of the Institute.

Vera has enjoyed a lifelong interest in medicine. “Being around hospitals was always fascinating to me. I was a premed student in college. I think I thought, in my heart of hearts, that

one day I would be a physician. But at that time there was so much prejudice against women doctors that I threw in the towel and became an English major.” Her relationship with Cedars-Sinai evolved naturally.

“We loved this hospital. Our children and grandchildren were born there. So when, in 1982, I was asked to join United Hostesses’ Charities [one of the Medical Center’s support groups], I was delighted by the opportunity.” She served on its board for four years. Later, she was asked to join Women’s Guild. “I was president for four years and that was truly a privilege and a pleasure. I love the intelligence, energy, and commitment of these women. We are very compatible. It is like a sisterhood.”

The respect is mutual. This spring, Judy Briskin, who succeeded Vera as president of Women’s Guild, bestowed the Evelyn Clayburgh Award (the “Evi”) upon her predecessor “for extraordinary service.”

“Vera is a great organizer and leader,” says Briskin. “She always comes up with brilliant ideas and, to tell you the truth, she’s a hard act to follow.”

Vera does not seek the spotlight, but when invited last year to participate in a Cedars-Sinai roundtable on philanthropy moderated by Charlie Rose, she more than held her own with fellow panelists Bill Gates Sr., and Jeffrey Katzenberg. Asked by Rose how and why she became a philanthropist, she talked movingly about her father who, as a young man, smuggled children out

“I think we appreciate everything we have today because we worked so hard for it. It was the best lesson ever in our lives —VERA GUERIN

of the ghetto and, after surviving Auschwitz, became a public defender in Germany for displaced persons. In the U.S. his leadership skills were in such demand that he ended up on multiple boards, some private, some governmental, including the presidency of California’s “Little Hoover” Commission. “He belonged to the community more than he belonged to his family,” says Vera. “He was very vested in that role and modeled it for me. He always stressed the importance of giving back.”

“Vera learned from her parents and, over the years, I learned from Vera and her parents,” says Paul. Ultimately, Paul and his father-in-law became extraordinarily close. “It was a wonderful relationship,” says Vera. “He was looking for parents and they were thrilled to get such a caring son-in-law.”

The Guerins have enjoyed a wonderful marriage and an ideal philanthropic partnership. Looking back, Vera credits her strong-willed parents, “made stronger by their survival,” for giving her the strength to leave home and carve out her own direction. “I knew I could be self-sufficient. I could support myself. I could put Paul through school. We did all that. We had three children and struggled. I think that’s why we appreciate everything we have today, because we worked so hard for it. It was the best lesson ever in our lives and I thank my parents for that.”

Vera’s many philanthropic passions—from Harvard-Westlake to Cedars-Sinai—have always evolved out of her personal interests at different stages of her life. While raising her three children, Lisa, Dana, and Michael, she became deeply committed to education. She became a trustee at Harvard-Westlake, served on the Stephen S. Wise Temple advisory board, and now sits on the board of the Skirball Cultural Center in Los Angeles. “Skirball is an ambassador of goodwill for Judaism,” says Paul, “and we’re very proud to be a part of it.” The Guerins are underwriting a new building on its campus.

Vera and her parents—Nathan and Lillian Shapell—emigrated to America in 1953 when Vera was five. Her father, a brilliant businessman, spoke not a word of English. Tutored by his equally-brilliant wife—who read, spoke, and wrote in seven languages—he learned

English and turned a small home building business in Orange County into a vast real estate empire, becoming a behind-the-scenes California power broker along the way.

Vera, it turns out, has the temperament and skills of a Hollywood producer. Musical theater is her “hobby and passion.” When she isn’t producing a show for the Women’s Guild 50th Anniversary Gala—an evening emceed by Billy Crystal last year that raised \$1.9 million for the Institute—she is developing new entertainment productions, including her latest, “Tom Jones: The Musical.” These days, however, her energies are more focused on her philanthropic commitments.

Currently a board member of both Cedars-Sinai and Women’s Guild, she also serves as liaison between Cedar-Sinai’s Medical Center and its support groups as chairperson of the Coordinating Council. Paul is on Cedars-Sinai’s Board of Governors and has served on the Executive Committee.

Vera and Paul are also fulfilling a pledge made by Nathan Shapell and his foundation to fund the pioneering work of cardiologist P.K. Shah (see sidebar). “Dr. Shah has been a family friend and family physician, especially to my Dad, who met him about ten years ago,” says Vera. “He was up-and-coming and making great discoveries. We had such a close relationship, it just followed we would support his program. He is on the brink of some very important medical breakthroughs. It’s a new age for medical research and it’s extraordinary being part of it.”

How do the Guerins decide on their philanthropic commitments? “We pretty much agree on everything and support each other,” says Vera. “I’m more the macro-manager and Paul is more the detail person. He’s wonderful at it. Our approaches are different but we meet at the center with a common goal.”

The spring sun pours through the windows into the beautiful, art-filled home Paul and Vera share. The house, perched on a canyon with a dramatic view of the mountains and the Pacific, was destroyed in the Northridge earthquake. “It slid off its foundation at 4:30 in the morning,” recalls Vera. “Everything was falling and



With Private Help, a Promising Vaccine

When Cardiologist P.K. Shah, MD, first developed his revolutionary theory about the Apo A-1 Milano gene (a genetic mutation found in 40 individuals in Northern Italy), it was too speculative for traditional NIH funding. "What we were talking about was completely unconventional. No other laboratory was doing similar work," says Dr. Shah, who directs the Division of Cardiology and the Oppenheimer Atherosclerosis Research Center at Cedars-Sinai.

He turned to private philanthropy and has been turning to it ever since. "Private philanthropy has an increasingly critical role to play in the germination of novel and unconventional ideas in healthcare," says Dr. Shah. He holds the Shapell and Webb Family Endowed Chair in Cardiology at Cedars-Sinai. "I had a very close relationship with Nathan Shapell as a patient and a dear friend. When he unexpectedly passed away, Vera (Guerin) was extraordinarily gracious and without any question agreed to abide by the 'gentleman's agreement' that her father had made to me and to Irving Feintech, a close friend to Nathan and I."

Compared to the normal gene, the mutant gene Apo A-1 Milano produces a form of HDL (high-density lipoprotein or "good" cholesterol) that provides greater protection against atherosclerosis and vascular inflammation. Shah and his team created a protein from a copy of the gene which confers protection against cholesterol-plaque buildup. It reduced and in some cases reversed plaque buildup. The breakthrough work could create a new treatment paradigm for managing a disease process that begins in childhood and causes the vast majority of heart attacks, strokes, and sudden deaths.

Early-stage clinical trials are encouraging. "The data shows that within five weeks of the weekly injection the arterial plaque can shrink." If a large-scale trial proves successful, experts predict this will be the most important advance in defeating heart disease since statin drugs.

At the same time Shah's team is also actively developing a gene-transfer approach to exploiting the benefits of this protein. "By taking the gene, hooking it up with a carrier virus and putting the virus into the body, it lets the body become the factory to produce its own protein." Dr. Shah and his team are also working on a novel vaccine against cholesterol that reduces artery blockage in mice and is slated to enter human testing within the next 18 months.

The NIH eventually funded Shah's gene-therapy work. And he and his colleague, Dr Behrooz Sharifi, have just learned that the NIH will allow them to pursue their latest stunning discovery: the existence of embryonic stem cell-like cells in the bellies of mice. "We've isolated them and are in the process of proving they can be turned into different organs. We've already proved they can replace the bone marrow of mice." However, the NIH cannot fund the entire program, which is why private philanthropy continues to "serve as an excellent source of seed money and supplemental funds to support already funded programs," he says.

Without this visionary support, Shah's visionary work might never move from theory to reality.

smashing. We had to dig out our son, Michael." The event forcefully reminded Vera of the values she'd carried with her since the day she eloped. "Material things were never really important to me. I know it's a cliché but, as long as your family is okay, that's what counts."

This spring they will travel to Israel to hand out scholarships for the Bob Shapell School at Tel Aviv University, an endowment started by Vera's father. Active philanthropists in Israel, they will also dedicate several projects they initiated, including a new sports center and auditorium on Israel's main air base. Paul is president and board chairman of Friends of Israeli Defense Forces (FIDF), a support group for Israel's soldiers. It raised \$19 million under his leadership.

"It gives us a great deal of pleasure to support these causes," says Paul. "And more important, our children are getting a very important education in giving. They now come to us with projects of their own. When they do, we sit down in our office and have a business meeting about it. They have to do research on the organization before they come because if they don't ... I close down the meeting! They're getting that wonderful feeling of what it's like to give back."

Vera still loves being around Cedars-Sinai. "It's an exceptional institution. Not only does it do wonderful work it's also not complacent. It's constantly growing and reinventing itself."

Clearly, Vera and Paul Guerin are constantly growing and reinventing themselves, as well. But one thing has not changed: Whatever they do, as philanthropists, parents, or collectors, they still follow their hearts. ■